

INFORMAL INTELLIGENCE SHARING THE PUBLIC CITY

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THE FINANCIAL TIMES
SINCE 1999

We invited architecture and design critic Edwin Heathcote to share his thoughts on the activities carried out over the six month period. As someone who was not involved in the project process, we asked him to explore and write about his impressions of the work developed in urbanxchanger and to review the outcomes with fresh eyes. In this newspaper, Heathcote's narrative appears on the left side of each page spread, always in black lettering. Complementary information has been added alongside to provide the reader with a more in-depth understanding of the situations and actors described in his telling.

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'The city', wrote Lewis Mumford, 'is a fact in nature, like a cave, a run of mackerel or an ant-heap. But it is also a conscious work of art, and it holds within its communal framework many simpler and more personal forms of art.'

There's something unsettling about the ant-heap, but the notion of the informal city as something more akin to an organism than a modernist machine, rings true. It is a settlement made without architects, without planners, but not made without architecture or planning. When we talk about sustainability, we talk about embodied energy in the structures of the city—but we do not talk about the embodied intelligence that the informal city is so clearly soaked in. The ad hoc, improvisational character of informality is endlessly astonishing. People make their city however they can, with whatever tools and whatever means they have available to them. And although they may lack many of the amenities we have come to expect from our cities,

these places are at least—if not more—urban than the most carefully planned cities on earth. Their magic is in their density, not just in how tightly packed they are with people, but in the intensity of transactions—social, financial, cooperative, community. People making and repairing, inventing, stripping down and making anew, in chance encounters and mutual support.

The temptation with the informal city is always to start again—to plan, to rebuild. But the problems facing the world's cities are almost incomprehensible in their scale. The world will double its rate of urbanisation by the year 2050. There will be twice as many people in cities as there are today, with two billion of them living in informal situations. There are no solutions that can be imposed from above. Change will have to come from the streets and the shanties, the alleys and the hillsides, from the bottom up.

Urbanxchanger is an attempt to catalyse that change, that ingenuity, through research and experimentation in particular places and with existing populations, and then to create a platform for sharing that intelligence.

WASTE OF SPACE?

Space can be scarce, space can be abundant, space can be ill-defined. But it is in the intelligent and intense use of space that the spirit of the city resides.

Whether it is intensity, density or boundary, each of the interventions presented here are, in their own way, about the definition and delineation of space. On the very edge of Mexico City, space seems to be abundant, the natural landscape stretching as far as the eye can see, yet it is precisely the question of defining the boundary between city and country that will maintain it as a special place.

Outside São Paulo, there is leftover space, a strip of unused land beneath the overhead power cables. In the dense informality of New Delhi there is urban space, but it is ill-defined as a place. In Cape Town, the problem is the containment of interior space, the creation of a framework to define space. In Berlin the problem is definition too—the strange anomaly of generous communal space that appears to have no particular purpose and ends up being used by no-one.

The problems of informal settlements are often assumed to be insurmountable. The urban-changer projects illustrate the tangibility of even the smallest interventions in defining place

and space, and in radically improving urban conditions through minimal means.

Every city has its own problems, and every settlement its own specific scarcities and deprivations, but each can learn something from every other. This is the story of that potential for exchange.

PRODUCTION BENEATH POWER

The edge of any megacity is poorly defined, a boundary in constant flux, always being tested, pushed and questioned. It vacillates between the urban and the rural, between productivity and waste, between agriculture, suburb and slum.

It is precisely this uncertainty that makes it so full of potential, an embryonic space of the possible. But how does the city impinge on the country without the rural disappearing, or the informal flattening its potential?

The answer—in provocative part at least—is here, on the eastern edge of São Paulo. And that answer snakes along wasted space

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SÃO PAULO The electric power transfer lines are installed in linear areas that cross throughout urban regions, isolating the space it occupies. This initiative exemplifies a partnership forged with the local farmers, responsible for the management of these areas, which led to temporary concessions allowing for the use of those spaces.

beneath the power lines that are bringing electricity into the city.

Beneath this corridor of power is an attenuated landscape of urban agriculture, brought back into productive life by communities, in cooperation with AES Eletropaulo, the power company and proprietor of the overhead cables and the strip of land beneath them. The project addresses both the lack of public and green space in the city, the

lack of access to freshly-cultivated food for the poorer inhabitants of the community, and the lack of opportunities for small-income supplements for local residents. Cities Without Hunger, an NGO that's been in operation since 2004, uses gardening as a mechanism for not only improving the nutrition of adults and children, but also as a way of socially reintegrating marginalised groups. Food is always a focus of social

life—but its importance is amplified through poverty.

Coalescing around the work started by Mr Genival, a local pioneer who had begun cultivating the land beneath the power lines, this project represents an attempt to formalise the arrangements with the power company, to promote the garden as both production and activity, and to create a space where food can be tested, tasted, discussed, and ideas disseminated.

This is a project based on production, on the land. Its physical manifestations are designed with only the lightest touch. Yet it is also about the creation of an urban space to supplement a piece of city that is dense and poorly-served. It is paradoxical in its nature—an urban space in the country, a green strip for the city from which it stands apart, and an organic farm compensating for the carbon-hungry power being transported directly above it.

The elements of the project, developed in collaboration with the NGO and the local farmers, are unassuming—deliberately ad hoc and impermanent as they bow to the rural, rather than attempting to emulate the urban in the countryside. There is the roof—a simple timber structure with a fabric covering to create a place for gathering—

the most basic canopy for table and benches. There is the toilet—another archetypal shelter, in which waste becomes fertiliser. And there is a playground and a gym, two sides of the same coin, which allow city-dwellers to move freely, exercise and enjoy each other's company and the fresh air. The equipment in both is ingeniously recycled—tyres to drag or grow things in, waste wood and metal up-cycled into equipment. And then there is the food cart, a vehicle for vending the products of the land and a totem for taking the fruits of the community's labour out into the wider city—a piece of mobile architecture.

This is not a project that's going to change the world. It is predicated on a particular piece of unused land beneath a particular type of infrastructure, and it draws its strength from the particular conditions and fertile ground of São Paulo's urban edge. But perhaps it is precisely in its modesty, in the simplicity of its aims and the ad hoc nature of its construction that it becomes something more. This is something any community can easily aspire to—and the conditions which might seem so specific—the unused strip of land—are conditions which prevail in every city, whether it is under-used public space, railway verges or infra-structural fringes. With the city's

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imaginative use of its water facilities as public pocket parks, Medellín has already proved how fruitful it can be to re-appropriate the urban possessions of the utility companies. The São Mateus scheme looks modest in comparison, but that's precisely why it is reproducible—with the means available even to the poorest. Where it needs clarity is in the relationship to the city. São Paulo's vast scale means that those living at its edges will spend the beginnings and the ends of their days on journeys into the city for work. Will there be enough to attract them to travel yet further in the precious few moments of their spare time? Or is this a project for the others whose jobs do not take them to the city centre, or who have no jobs at all? The young, the old, the women, the marginal?

It is fascinating that what in the Global North looks like a decadent project, expressing an urban bourgeois yearning to produce organic food of one's own, to escape the city for the roots, appears on the margins and in the Global South as a lifesaver, the difference between hunger and desire, and providing a tool for cohesion and social togetherness. Perhaps it is precisely in this paradox that its universal applicability lies. Food here, as it is in all our realities, is at the heart of our culture and our survival. ///

FINDING THE EDGE

The project in Miravalle embraces the myriad complex issues of the informal, and, in the process of making small changes to particular situations, it also radically redefines the city's edge into a place of production and real community, rather than a distant, dysfunctional, inconvenient dormitory suburb. The problems this project addresses are possibly the most universal of urban concerns, and it is intriguing to see how solutions aimed at the poor extremities of a Global South megacity can seem so pertinent to the ennui of the modern metropolis in the cool climate of the Global North.

This is a scheme about edges, in the macro and the micro context. It is about how the city ends and how it meets the landscape at its edge, and it is about how boundaries are defined within the settlement, how privacy is maintained, while civic life is simultaneously allowed to flourish. Beyond these more abstract ideals is a series of interventions addressing everyday needs—including a dome designed to facilitate the collection of potable rainwater.



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MEXICO CITY View of Miravalle from the volcano

The project began with a group walk. If this could be seen as a way of marking territory through civic action, it was, I think, intended rather as a vehicle within which to understand the context—to take the landscape into psychic public ownership.

This is critical here—as it is in all cities—because the definition of the edge reflects the perception of the city itself. London has its green belt, Venice has its lagoon, Miravalle has its volcano.

A communal climb up that

volcano's verdant side acts as a bonding session for the community that undertakes it, and as an act of cultural appropriation (but not of physical ownership). And it allows a view back onto the neighbourhood itself—that collective vantage point is symbolic of a community understanding of the scale, the context and the character of the settlement. It is also a glimpse of beauty—the landscape, the topography and the forest. It is a quality so often lacking in the informal settlements—and

sometimes it is easy to forget even when it is there.

Once the ritual walk is undertaken, the intention is that the community itself decides which interventions it might build. This is a highly organised community that has, in the last decades, increasingly defined itself socially, as well as physically. Here, each project is a critical part of the affirmation of its identity.

Based on existing community development, the resulting interventions veer between the subtle and the overbearing, the magical and the questionable. The definition of boundaries in these contexts is always difficult—it's understandable for a community to want to define itself and its edge, but how does it affect those who might arrive in the future? Will it deny newcomers the opportunities its residents had themselves? This is a new neighbourhood, now formalised, which evolved from an informal settlement. Are these new boundaries symbols of success and consolidation? Or of exclusion?

The previous interventions found in the landscape are many and varied, all constructed with modest means, often with dual functions. A retaining wall, necessary to provide a kindergarten with a level playground, is transformed into an amphithe-

atre, a public forum and place of performance. Stairs are created from treads of discarded tyres, trees are given surrounds which become seats. These structures are formed using materials gathered from the landscape, and the topography is worked with, rather than against, so that the landscape becomes a feature rather than an obstacle.

Different than a government-built school that proved unwieldy and over-scaled, the community did not build large new structures, but rather negotiated and repaired existing, adequate ones. The one totemic new structure was the billowing canopy of the 'Water Dome', upgrading it into an ingenious method for collecting the abundant downpours from the rainy season, and storing it in a cistern for community use. This becomes a marker of place and use, a kind of contemporary village well.

Beyond these landscape projects, the collaboration with the community turned its hand to the construction of physical forms of safety. In a series of moves that echo the principles of Jane Jacobs—eyes on the street, open doors and courtyards, improved connectivity—the public spaces were animated and tamed, made safe for all through minimal, but thoughtful intervention, which

also had the effect of making the public space more coherent and contained. The final element of safeguarding consisted of wrapping spaces—on the principle that if a space appears to be cared for, it will be more respected. Is this always the case? Perhaps these are steps that need to be taken as experiments. Some may work, some may fade or be adapted. But, as a means of intervention with minimal resources and maximal efficiency, they are undeniably effective. ///

TOP TABLE

The fundamental condition of informality is precariousness. The existential uncertainty which underpins the anxiety of informal living is exacerbated by seemingly every condition of day-to-day life: the unstable, ad hoc buildings, the unplanned development which is somehow simultaneously both too-dense and too-sparse, the lack of tenure and the questions hanging over utilities, land and legality. But it spreads beyond the physical conditions and becomes an aspect of life itself. Lack of access to education and employment, proclivity to crime, dependency on drugs and alcohol, social isolation, lack of community—each of these factors contrib-

utes to an existence on the edge, in which every element acts as a reminder of inadequacy.

Innumerable architects, NGOs, inventors, charities, engineers and assorted outsiders have proposed solutions to these problems, yet few of these solutions have gained much traction. When governments move in the results are almost invariably failures—cookie-cutter solutions laid out in dim networks, too dispersed to make a town, the dwellings too similar and too simplistic to create a streetscape. The houses themselves are usually inadequate, becoming symbols of dependency rather than of attainment, and they are rarely suited to the diverse needs of communities—proposing instead a single way of living, and allowing for little else. They have no capacity for expansion, for accommodating workshops or garages, or extra space for extended families—and they take little account of cultural, social or climatic conditions.

Solutions proposed by outsiders may be ingenious, but they tend not to last long. Once their inventors have moved on, residents often return to found materials and low-tech techniques to supplement them. The scarcity of good solutions explains Alejandro Aravena's, Half a Good House, which earned him this year's Pritzker Prize. It may not be a

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CAPE TOWN Construction process: assembling various actors for the construction of a proto-type

hugely original solution, but it does propose a decent, urban dwelling with the built-in capacity to adapt and grow, and to allow the inhabitants to express their own desires and needs through the architecture as it develops. Architects like it because it looks like a compromise between top-down (Aravena has made the designs freely available) and bottom-up (inhabitants are allowed to customise the architecture). And they also like it because it looks like they are doing some-

thing. It assuages guilt by proposing that a decent house could be provided to the poor. But it is still, necessarily, a state-sponsored solution that demands money and building expertise.

The Table House is archetypal architecture—pure structure, a minimal provision of posts and beams that provides a solid base, but little more. It is the structural expression of exactly the stability which life in the informal settlements lacks.

One of the most intriguing things about the Table House is that it can accommodate an existing dwelling beneath it. In earthquakes, extreme weather (or nuclear wars, as it once was) we are told to hunker down beneath a table for protection from falling rubble. The table—that most elemental expression of family life and sustenance—becomes a kind of literal and symbolic architecture of protection.

The structure is simple—steel posts (table legs) and steel beams and deck (table top), and a junction that resembles a kind of concrete column capital. The deck can be a roof for an existing shack, or a first floor. The construction allows flexibility within the structure or can become the structure itself. Most importantly it anchors the dwelling to the ground—a solid base from which to start.

The metaphor works for the workers as well as the dwellers. Co-designers of the Table House, Hands of Honour, is a community initiative working in the Cape Flats with local unemployed men and those recovering from addiction. They make simple furniture using up-cycled materials. The punchline is that they up-cycle people too, broken lives patched back together. The process of construction and the skills needed—welding, construction, laying con-

crete—impart valuable experience, and help to build trust and cooperation.

There is something slightly '60s about the Table House—the idea of the mega-structure brought down to the scale of the informal. Many of the most radical architects of the period were looking at space-frames and superstructures (Yona Friedman's Ville Spatiale, Konrad Wachsmann's space-frames and even Superstudio's visionary drawings come to mind). Each saw that the architect of the future may be employed, not to create the individual dwelling, but the frame within which inhabitants would be free to build their homes in any way they wanted. This was a libertarian, sci-fi vision that transferred contemporary ideas from extra-terrestrial planetary bases and post-apocalyptic landscapes to commuter cities, and provided ways of overbuilding existing historic centres without destroying the original fabric. The Table House is a kind of miniaturised version, with the same idea of freedom in which it is the dweller who determines the materials, scale and appearance of the home. The architect does not dictate the conditions, the aesthetics or the lifestyle—but rather provides only the structure, anchoring the house to the site and the dwelling to the city. ///

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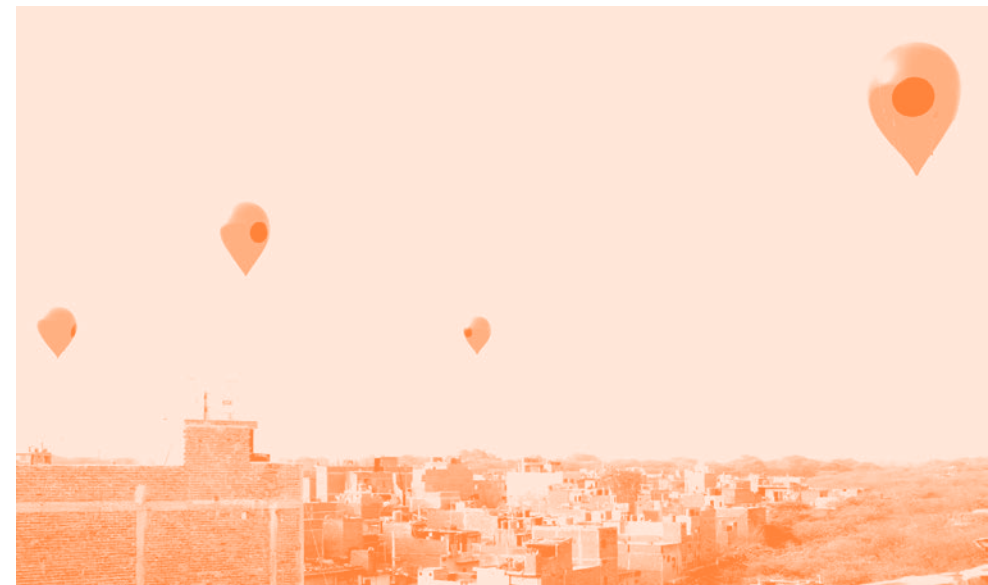
WASTE AND SPACE

Sangam Vihar is a settlement of perhaps one-and-a-half million people on the edge of Delhi. It is a huge, but neglected territory at the frontier between the forest and the megacity. The neighbourhood is inhabited mostly by new arrivals to the city, so its sense of identity and belonging is very much in flux, something still unformed. As an unauthorised colony, not only does the settlement lack the provision of basic

infrastructure and a sense of legitimacy, it is also vulnerable to planning decisions—the city master plan envisions a ring road that could open the area up to land speculation.

This complex, collaborative project is an attempt to consolidate the sense of community, location and physical fabric within a fragile structure. It is an effort to reinforce the links between people and place, but also to signal the presence of the place—spatially and politically—within the vast Indian metropolis. To do this, the initiative embarked on a so-called 'Schizo-Plan'—an approach defined by its determinedly not

NEW DELHI View of the settlement from Asola Wildlife sanctuary



being a master plan—where the design teams and different community voices developed micro and macro-planning tools to facilitate local action, and to communicate to governmental agencies at large.

Part of the project involved marking the territory with the use of wayfinding and location balloons, designed to establish identity and communicate legitimacy beyond the settlement. Based on the ubiquitous Google Map symbols these markers became a ludic, almost pop art intervention, an attempt to stamp a sense of place on the collective consciousness of community and city. Five red balloons identified sites and events along the edge to facilitate the recoding of the settlement, and to establish the green edge as Sangam Vihar's new front.

Alongside water and waste management projects, other initiatives included creating mock-ups of the green spaces in an effort to raise awareness about the potential to turn wasteland at the edge of the settlement into public space, while at the same time acting as a buffer to protect the vulnerable area from development. Through the activation of urban space, the initiative ultimately attempts to forge a new dialogue amongst the fragile urban constituencies that lack entitlement and security. ///

TRANSFER, TRANSACTION AND TRANSFORMATION

There is a persistent idea that the Global North could learn much from the Global South: the notion that the astonishing variety, inventiveness, ingenuity and speed with which informal settlements can respond to successive crises and changes in situation, could provide inspiration for the rigid, seemingly static and inflexible cities of the cool Global North.

The contrast between the intelligence embodied in unplanned informal areas, and the lethargy, lack of responsiveness and sheer waste often characteristic of the planning in the wealthiest cities, certainly seems to favour the former. We read that planning is the basis of every civilised city, yet what room does the system leave for improvisation? Many of the most successful cities have proved themselves inadequate to deal with the radical changes they are required to cope with: mass immigration from very different cultures; financial crises; ageing populations; the collapse of heavy industries; globalisation.

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The irony is that the space is there. In East Germany, where planning has responded to political and social concerns, rather than a commercial agenda, public space is plentiful, yet is allowed to lie fallow. The no-man's land represented by neglected communal spaces between housing blocks and municipal buildings should present an opportunity to create a territory to bring disparate communities together, and to use the city as a social space. Yet it is not. Whether this is due to the reluctance of communities comfortable in their own company, or whether it is because people lack the models, the language and the experience to activate public space, is uncertain. Or even, perhaps because of the rigid ways in which the contemporary city is controlled—the rafts of legislation which demands liability for any accident or unplanned event. Whatever it is, the transfer of knowledge seems problematic.

The challenge for otherwise prosperous cities in adapting to changing conditions will be to address the atomisation and alienation embodied in their current incarnations. Cities are measured incessantly in terms of GDP, financial transactions, land values, and now even in questionable measures of 'happiness'. Architect Teddy Cruz has suggested instead that we measure the

density and success of the city in terms of social, rather than financial transactions. If that were the case, then the myriad encounters and bargains, the favours and the conversations exchanged outside doorways, the free babysitting, and the care of the elderly in the extended family, all suddenly appear as evidence of success.

The citizens of the Global North have spent decades improving their living conditions, only to find themselves isolated, worried about security and separated from their loved ones. Can the urban commons be resurrected to address these issues? Can we use the seemingly simple measures invented and adopted in the conditions of the informal to begin to stick the city back together again? This is a question about the idea of a city. What is it for? Who is it for? The experiments of the urbanxchanger allow us to better understand the humanity that is at the heart of the city. They make us think about what the city is, how it is defined, and how we can play our part in redesigning it where it is found lacking. The exchange provides an understanding that scarcity is not always an issue of resources, but can be about a lack of cohesion, involvement and inclusivity. There is always something to be learnt.